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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 001215

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

1E. O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL SOCI VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: PROTESTANT POSSIBLY BEATEN, DETAINED FOR DISTRIBUTING

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. At least one Protestant religious worker in Ho Chi Minh City was reportedly beaten and detained on December 9 for involvement in the distribution of religious leaflets designed to look like official Southeast Asia (SEA) Games pamphlets. Other Protestant leaders held a "sit-in" at a local police station to protest the arrest. One pastor told ConGen that a high-ranking police contact had indicated late Tuesday that distributors of this pamphlet would be strictly prosecuted. The organizers had previously received repeated warnings from authorities not to distribute the material. Other pastors and religious workers who were involved in distributing the pamphlets have reportedly failed to check in with family and friends. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) HCC Protstants printed 200,000 copies of a religious pamphlet for distribution in both Hanoi and HCMC during this year's 22nd annual SEA Games December 5-14, which Vietnam is hosting for the first time. The front cover of the pamphlet reads "SEA GAMES 22: Vietnam 2003" and includes the official SEA Games logo and other official-looking symbols. The back cover has the schedule for men's and women's soccer events. Closed, the pamphlet is indistinguishable from an official program of events, but the inside reveals two full pages of religious quotes and information.

13. (SBU) On the evening of December 9, an unregistered Mennonite house church pastor and an associate claimed to have been confronted by police after leaving another pastor's home where the pamphlets were being stored. The first pastor fled the scene back to the second pastor's home, but his associate was allegedly beaten and detained by police. The associate was reportedly taken to a police station in HCMC's District 1. Poloff spoke with several Protestant contacts during the night and received conflicting reports. A third Protestant pastor told Poloff that he had spoken with high-level contacts in the HCMC branch of the Ministry of Public Security and been told that the decision had been made to strictly prosecute those responsible for the pamphlet. Authorities had previously warned the organizers of the group more than once not to distribute the pamphlet.

14. (SBU) The Mennonite pastor and fifteen associates have engaged in a "sit-in" at the District 1 police station since last night to demand the release of their detained colleague. Fifteen other Protestants, including the pastor whose house was used for storage of the brochures, have yet to check in with their families and friends. This follows the alleged one-day detention of seven Protestants in the Hanoi area a few days ago. One of those individuals was also allegedly beaten. All of these cases involved distribution of the pamphlet.

15. (SBU) Initial reports by pastors to ConGen on December 9 made conflicting claims that up to 16 Protestants had been beaten and were under medical care, or were detained at three separate locations. In a separate meeting earlier the same day, one of the pastors told ConGen a student had been beaten by eleven police for distributing the pamphlet. When ConGen asked to meet with the student, the pastor refused, saying there were no marks and there was no point in asking any questions. As of December 10 in the morning, the various stories had synthesized into one detainee and fifteen sit-in protesters. However, a December 10 public statement from the Vietnamese Mennonite Church on the same events, received subsequently via Post's public affairs email account, claims that police attacked a religious worker and pastor with "electric rods and pistols" in an attempt to "assassinate" the two. An update from the group the evening of December 10 indicated that a deal was being brokered in which the police would release several detainees, including some of those who had not been in touch with their families, if the sit-in would disperse.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: While Post is attempting to clarify the situation, some of the primary sources for this incident are among the least credible. This is the same group that was involved in an incident during the visit of A/S Dewey earlier in the year, when a confrontation over a prayer service with mistakes on both sides led to one of the pastors "punching a policeman," in his own words. There were still other incidents with this group during another high-level visit on religious issues. They have also illicitly brought cameras and video recorders to meetings with Congen staff to try to videotape the meetings on the Internet and use them for publicity. Post was disconcerted that a top Protestant community leader knew nothing about the alleged pamphlet incident nearly twenty-four hours later. Those involved

in the incident wanted to have a ConGenOff come meet with them at the police station, but have yet to act on an invitation to meet elsewhere to discuss the incident in detail.

17. (SBU) Comment continued: The GVN has several options by which to prosecute this case beyond normal restrictions on proselytizing, including misrepresentation, unauthorized use of official government logos, and even IPR violations if the logos were copyrighted. ConGen will continue to monitor the situation and follow up with our contacts, while remaining cautious about being drawn into deliberate, manipulative provocations. It's hard to tell whether the police are more upset by the religious content of the pamphlet or the fact that the GVN itself was made to look like it was proselytizing.

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